POINT-COUNTERPOINT

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Actions are authentic, but are leaders? A reconceptualization of authenticity and leadership practice

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the Gallup Leadership Summit, authentic leadership has ascended as a central topic of inquiry owing to practitioners and academicians' desire for more positive types of leadership (Braun & Peus, 2018; Ilies et al., 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Weiss et al., 2018). Like much of the extant literature, our article centers on authentic leadership as defined and operationalized by Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) four-part framework, which views authentic leaders as individuals who possess high levels of (a) self-awareness, (b) balanced processing, (c) relational transparency, and (d) having an internalized moral perspective. This definition originated from positive psychology and gained popularity, in part, because it offers a morally grounded response for organizations seeking to rebuild confidence, hope, and optimism amid growing corporate and societal problems (e.g., Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio et al., 2004). As a result, scholarly research on authentic leadership has surged (see Gardner et al., 2011, for a review), quickly gaining traction with a wide array of stakeholders who desire leaders that promote behavioral integrity (Leroy et al., 2012), encourage creativity (Semedo et al., 2017), and foster intra-team trust as well as helping behaviors (Hirst et al., 2016).[1]

Despite growing interest in authentic leadership, scholars have reviewed and critiqued the construct before raising theoretical and empirical concerns (Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Gardiner, 2015; Sidani & Rowe, 2018). Prior critiques have challenged authentic leadership's contextual grounding, leader-centric ideologies, definitional ambiguity, morality emphasis, and view of a true self (Crawford et al., 2020; Ladkin & Spiller, 2013; Vendette et al., 2022). Further issues raised questions about authentic leadership's unique value over and above other more heavily researched leadership styles (Banks et al., 2016) as well as show the construct's misguided roots in positive psychology (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). With regard to this latter point, the significance of what it means to be authentic originated from the philosophical movement of existentialism,[2] including the works of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. However, authenticity in a leadership context has been more predominately positioned in positive psychology, gaining popularity along with the positive movement in organizational studies. Indeed, as Iszatt-White and Kempster (2019) have remarked, the authentic leadership construct is entrenched in a "somewhat superficial" and "one-sided" interpretation of authenticity from positive psychology (p. 360). Positive psychology's hold on authenticity is the "antithesis" of existential forms of leadership as its idealized description neglects how authenticity is enacted and discounts the diversity of lived experience (Tomkins & Simpson, 2015, p. 1023). We argue that positive psychology's misinterpretation of existential authenticity not only explains why researchers continue to conflate authentic actions with authentic leaders but also calls into question authentic leadership as a theory and construct more broadly.

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[1]As of March 14, 2023, for example, Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) measure development paper has received 5241 Google Scholar citations and 1242 Web of Science citations.

[2]Existentialism is a broad philosophical theory that examines questions of human existence.

The abovementioned issues underlie the central purpose of this point-counterpoint discussion, which is to illustrate that authenticity of action is distinct and adds value beyond that of authentic leadership. Despite preceding critiques, to date, scholarly interest in authentic leadership research appears to be accelerating, not stalling. Thus, in an effort to explain why authentic leadership studies will face continued criticism, we retrace authenticity's theoretical foundations to shed light on the conceptual, definitional, and empirical issues stemming from its positive psychology origins. While the critiques of authentic leadership are plentiful and growing, we are the first to show that the authentic leadership construct was handicapped from its inception by opening the proverbial "black box" and uncovering the root of what happened. Our interest in this regard is sparked by Suddaby's (2010) realization that when researchers "cannot agree on or communicate the basic elements of a phenomenon, the accumulation of knowledge cannot occur … and organizational knowledge becomes increasingly fragmented" (pp. 352–353). We thus scrutinize the authentic leadership construct, therein identifying meaningful misdirections in extant work so that our field may advance more useful theory development (e.g., Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021). In doing so, we contribute to the literature by hopefully (a) encouraging scholars to reconsider the blanket use of commonly accepted measures that exist within the authentic leadership arena and (b) stimulating theoretical and methodological advancements for "authentic" leadership research.

2 | AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP: ITS ORIGINS AND CORE ASSUMPTIONS

Ideally speaking, theory and empirical concerns should inform the development of new constructs. This is because construct validity stems from one's ability to express concepts into variables and, in turn, variables into instruments (Suddaby, 2010). Despite 15 years of research, there remains considerable confusion regarding the theoretical meaning that underlies authentic leadership's predominant measure, the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ, see Walumbwa et al., 2008). Such confusion is unfortunate because until researchers clearly define and operationalize the authentic leadership phenomenon, published works will face continued criticism and the knowledge transfer between organizational scientists and practitioners will lose pace. We therefore begin by revisiting the theoretical beginnings of authenticity research in an effort to better understand the evolutionary development of the authentic leadership construct.

2.1 | Existential origins of authenticity

During the early 20th century, the concept of authenticity and what it means to "live an authentic life" gained considerable interest among existential theorists. Existentialism is not a homogeneous theory, but the literature blossomed during the postmodern movement where two influential philosophers, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, contributed their individual viewpoints (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012;

Ciullia, 2013). As one might expect Sartre and Heidegger's philosophies are not identical, although their characterizations of authenticity share marked similarities (Lawler & Ashman, 2012). Consequently, our work draws from Sartre and Heidegger's philosophies, wherein they describe what it means to live authentically.

To begin, both Sartre and Heidegger contend that individual choice is a critical factor to being authentic; in short, they assert that it is the actions of an individual that defines who they are and creates meaning in one's life. Sartre's (1956) concept of authenticity stems from the notion of *freedom*, *bad (good) faith*, and *the look of another* whereas Heidegger (1962) uses the concepts of *anxiety*, *fallenness*, *being*, and *Das Man (Dasein)* in his depiction. For Sartre, individuals possess complete freedom over their choices where they first come into existence and then continually define themself through action. Sartrean philosophy does not view individuals as pre-destined for specific paths, but rather posits that each individual is responsible for their own actions and choices (which embody how they live in this world). Thus, to paraphrase a well-cited Sartrean phrase, individuals are merely what they make of themselves. Heidegger also embraces the importance of choice by viewing authenticity as an overarching state of Being[3] that looks upon an individual's collective actions over time. Heideggerian philosophy suggests that individuals can introspectively assess whether they were authentic through *moments of anxiety* by reflecting on how they acted and for whom. For Heidegger, authenticity is based on a historical assessment where either an individual (a) acted for themself (the *Self*) or (b) submitted to and consequently acted for some external force—a concept referred to as the *Other* or the *They-self*.

To illustrate the concepts of the Self and Other in a leadership context, we review how authenticity-inauthenticity tensions co-exist and inform whether a leader acted authentically. Sartre and Heidegger agree that authenticity and inauthenticity are not mutually exclusive principles as individuals will act both authentically and inauthentically during their life. A leader acts authentically when they resist the external pressure from the Other and chooses to act according to their own desires. In an organizational context, the Other might represent (a) the firm's cultural norms, (b) a team's social context and related members' expectations of the leader, and/or (c) the demands and whims from a leader's higher-level supervisor, and so on. The prevalence and pull of the Other is strong which often pushes leaders to act inauthentically. However, when leaders act of their own volition, they are making an intentional decision to behave authentically, and it is through these choices that leaders can themselves become more or less authentic. Restated, the key to understanding whether a leader acted authentically is assessing whether they made choices that aligned with the Self (authentic) or the Other (inauthentic).

Having briefly reviewed the historical (and philosophical) origins of authenticity, we wish to summarize a couple of key observations. First, leaders are incapable of achieving complete authenticity because, as an idealized state of Being, it is something that they are

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[3]Following traditional existential practices, we use capital letters to express the ontological stance of key terms such as Self, Other, and Being.

continuously moving towards (or away from). The authenticity of a leader ebbs and flows as their actions begin to align more (or less) with the attributed value systems held by the inauthentic Other versus the authentic Self. That is why authenticity is frequently described as a relative state wherein leaders can only achieve a certain level of authenticity, never becoming wholly authentic (Erickson, 1995). It therefore follows that authenticity should not be interpreted as a binary, either-or condition (i.e., a leader is either authentic or inauthentic); authenticity resides in a leader's act or choice itself rather than the leader per se. Second, authenticity and inauthenticity are not opposing ideals, but rather co-existing opposites as leaders may act authentically or inauthentically depending on each situated context. This juxtaposition between living an authentic versus inauthentic existence is an ever-present consideration that leaders contend with on a day-to-day basis. Given the salience of social pressure and the tendency to conform, existentialists contend that a true authentic existence is much less common than an inauthentic one. In sum, how existential theorists characterize (in)authenticity resonated with organizational scholars and contributed to our understanding of leadership theory (Bradley-Cole, 2021; Heil, 2013; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015).

2.2 | Authentic leadership: a review and evaluation of its development

As the pioneering researchers, Walumbwa et al. (2008) were faced with a key decision regarding which theoretical foundation they would utilize when developing the authentic leadership construct. It was imperative for Walumbwa et al. (2008) to be explicit about their selection—and they were. Walumbwa et al. (2008) selected Avolio, Gardner, and colleagues (e.g., Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005) along with Ilies et al.'s (2005)[4] scholarship as the theoretical foundation for authentic leadership and its survey instrument, the ALQ. They provided three reasons as to why these prior works provide the conceptual underpinnings needed to validly define and operationalize the authentic leadership construct.

First, Walumbwa et al. (2008) indicated that Avolio, Gardner, Ilies and colleagues provided a perspective of authentic leadership that was "firmly rooted in the extant social psychology theory and research on authenticity" (p. 93). As they explain, social psychologists, including Kernis (2003) and Deci and Ryan (2000), had "clarified" and "refined" the construct of authenticity. For example, Ilies et al. (2005) ground their conceptualization of authentic leadership within Kernis' (2003) multicomponent perspective of authentic functioning, described as "the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 376). Following suit, Walumbwa et al. (2008) concluded that as leaders come to know themselves, they will display behaviors that are consistent with their underlying values and beliefs (i.e., authentic behavior) which, in turn, facilitates optimal levels of leader self-esteem and well-being. Second, on the basis of positive

psychology principles, Walumbwa et al. (2008) advance Gardner et al.'s (2005) argument that an authentic leadership pre-requisite is to have an advanced level of internalized moral character. They note that because leading others involves ethical choices, the authentic leadership construct cannot be neutrally valenced, in the same way that Burns characterized transformational leaders as having high moral character (see Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94, as cited in Gardner et al., 2005). Finally, Walumbwa et al. (2008) contend that authentic leadership includes an overt focus on leader–follower development, reasoning that authentic leadership is "state-like and ultimately something one can develop in leaders" (p. 93).

Instead of drawing on authenticity's existential origins when developing the authentic leadership construct, Walumbwa et al. (2008) remark that their work is firmly grounded in Kernis' (2003) social psychological concept of authentic functioning (see also Gardner et al., 2011). A review of Kernis' (2003) seminal work reveals, however, that it too leverages existential tenets—in fact, Kernis and colleagues tout authenticity's philosophical roots by suggesting that it is "firmly entrenched" in "existentialism" and "localized to specific authors like Sartre or Heidegger" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 284). Given Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) reliance on Kernis' (2003) conceptualization of authenticity, it is unclear (to us at least) why they pivoted from authenticity's existential origins and key assumptions. Moreover, a comparative review of Kernis' (2003) concept of authentic functioning and the conceptualization and operationalization of the authentic leadership construct yields additional divergences.

According to Kernis (2003), authentic functioning has four discriminable components: (a) awareness, (b) unbiased processing, (c) action, and (d) relational authenticity (pp. 13–16). In short, the awareness component involves understanding and trusting in one's own feelings, motives and desires; these include, for example, being aware of one's strengths and weaknesses, traits, and feelings. Second, the unbiased processing component involves individuals fully embracing all self-relevant information as opposed to distorting, denying, or ignoring information that represents their negative aspects or characteristics. For example, akin to an ego defense mechanism, the unbiased processing component illustrates whether individuals can accept their weaknesses, instead of rationalizing these weaknesses or demeaning their importance altogether. Third, the action component refers to whether an individual behaves according to their true self. Kernis (2003) describes behaving authentically as "acting in accord with one's values, preferences, and needs as opposed to acting merely to please others or to attain rewards or avoid punishments through acting falsely" (p. 14). The final component of relational authenticity considers the importance of allowing others to "see the real you, good and bad" and, to this end, it is about being genuine when interacting with others and not fake (Kernis, 2003, p. 16). What is not advanced in Kernis' (2003) work is the explicit notion of morality and ethics; indeed, the "most influential thinkers of authenticity tend to consider authenticity as morally neutral" (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 4, p. 21).

As we alluded above, a comparison of the authentic leadership construct (Walumbwa et al., 2008) with Kernis (2003) yields both similarities and differences (see Table 1). In terms of similarities, the

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[4]Ilies et al. (2005) used Kernis' (2003) four components in their model: self-awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behavior/acting and authentic relational orientation (p. 376).

TABLE 1 Historical development of authentic Leadership's four-part framework.

Kernis' aspects of authenticity	Kernis' components of authenticity	Change in authenticity perspective	Walumbwa et al.'s components of authentic leadership
Cognitive	Awareness	*No change*	Self-awareness
Cognitive	Unbiased processing	*Terminology change (minor)* Walumbwa and colleagues believed using the term "balanced processing" instead of "unbiased processing" portrayed authentic leaders and followers' information processing capabilities with greater theoretical accuracy. Rather than asserting leaders and followers are devoid of cognitive *biases*, Walumbwa and colleagues proposed that leaders and followers can consider various aspects of a problem as they assess information in a reasonably *balanced* way (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 317).	Balanced processing
Social	Relational authenticity	*Terminology change (minor)* Walumbwa and colleagues believed using the term "relational transparency" instead of "relational authenticity" better illustrated the information sharing process. They found it more reflective of the straightforward and candid way that leaders and followers are thought to share information (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 317).	Relational transparency
Behavioral	Action	*Theoretical change (major)* Walumbwa and colleagues renamed Kernis' action component and introduced a new component called "internalized moral perspective." They formed internalized moral perspective by merging two components from extant authentic leadership research: (a) internalized regulation and (b) positive moral perspective (Gardner et al., 2011, p. 1123). The decision to rename the action component of Kernis' work had a profound theoretical effect because it disconnected positive authentic leadership from its existential philosophical roots.	Internalized moral perspective

Note: Kernis' aspects of authenticity are from Novicevic et al. (2006); *Kernis' components of authenticity* are from Kernis (2003). We provide the full reference for the citations above in the reference section. —— = no change in authenticity perspective; – – – = minor terminology change in authenticity perspective; — · · — · · = minor terminology change in authenticity perspective; — · — · — = major terminology change in authenticity perspective.

component of self-awareness is a core aspect of authentic leadership's operationalization and Kernis' (2003) theory of authentic functioning. In terms of differences, the first two modifications made by Walumbwa et al. (2008) largely arose from Avolio and Gardner (2005) and were relatively minor updates to Kernis' (2003) terminology. The first modification was that they adopted the term "balanced processing" to reflect leaders' information processing capabilities instead of Kernis' (2003) term "unbiased processing" (see Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 317). A second modification involved Walumbwa et al. (2008) changing Kernis' (2003) term "relational authenticity" to "relational transparency" to better capture how leaders and followers are thought to openly and transparently share information (see Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 317).

Unlike the first two modifications involving terminology, a third modification by Walumbwa et al. (2008) arguably reflects a much larger theoretical departure from Kernis' (2003) authenticity conceptualization. Specifically, Walumbwa et al. (2008) dropped Kernis' (2003) *authentic action* component and introduced *internalized moral perspective*, which was not in Kernis' initial work. Walumbwa et al. (2008) seemingly downplayed this decision, and Gardner et al. (2011) minimize the theoretical implications of the new facet as well, describing internalized moral perspective's introduction as a mere "renam[ing]" of Kernis' (2003) action component "to better reflect the leader's commitment to core ethical values" (p. 1123). And while the developers of the authentic leadership construct continue to maintain that "the four components of authentic leadership were derived from Michael Kernis' (2003) multi-component conceptualization" (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 1, p. 3), the result from swapping Kernis' action component for internalized moral perspective has received strong criticism (e.g., Alvesson & Einola, 2019). In fact, on closer inspection, the introduction of the internalized moral perspective facet prompts two related issues of concern.

The first issue is recasting the action component from Kernis' (2003) framework disconnected the authenticity aspect of the authentic leadership construct (and measure) from its existential origins. This is because the action component of authenticity, in particular, leveraged key concepts from Sartre and Heidegger's existential philosophy. Kernis and Goldman (2006) cited Sartre and Heidegger specifically when discussing the theoretical underpinnings of authentic behavior, suggesting that actions "… are freely chosen with a sense of agency" (p. 292). Further connecting their action component to existential tenets, Kernis and Goldman (2006) highlighted Sartre's belief that "people's way of 'being' is inextricably linked to their choices" (p. 291). A result of removing "actions" from authentic leadership's four-part framework was that Walumbwa et al. (2008), in effect, dismissed Sartre and Heidegger's contributions and thereby created an authentic leadership construct that departed from its existential origins. The inherent disconnect between existential tenets and how authentic leadership is currently conceptualized has led scholars to conclude that presenting, "authentic leadership as a (measurable) *construct* that *builds on* the thinking of these philosophers, and to portray it as some sort of modern-day

advancement of their works, is misleading" (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 2, p. 7, emphasis in original).

A second and related issue arises with the addition of internalized moral perspective to authentic leadership's conceptualization and measurement. In short, by explicitly including the notion of morality and ethics, Walumbwa et al. (2008) outright rejected the long-held notion that authentic behavior is morally and ethically neutral (see Gardner et al., 2005). They assert that given the potential impact a leader's actions can have on the lives of others, an "advanced level of moral development is a requirement for the achievement of leader authenticity" (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 93). The underlying premise being authentic leaders invoke their positive moral perspective and high ethical standards to guide decision making and behavior. This integration of morality and ethics into the authentic leadership construct has, however, been the subject of much debate insofar as morality considerations "… are not derived directly from the concept of authenticity" (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 398). Indeed, some scholars are concerned that the morality assumption is too far removed from authenticity's theoretical origins.

Recall that, philosophically speaking, authenticity is divorced from ethics in that an authentic action does not necessarily mean it is an ethical one (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Qu et al., 2019; Zander, 2013). It is believed that a leader's actions can be "true to self" without complying with normative standards. In fact, if a leader "falls" and thus decides to conform to the influence of the Other, who constructed these moral or ethical standards (e.g., societal, group, or firm expectations, and pressures), then they are acting inauthentically. Interestingly, Kernis and Goldman (2006) proposed that when a leader's core feelings and values oppose normative standards, then authenticity will manifest as short-term conflict affecting their overall functioning and well-being. For instance, when leaders act "falsely" distressing emotions typically ensue, which have been empirically linked with numerous physiological and psychological difficulties as well as poorer performance (e.g., Grandey, 2003). Perhaps, in part, it is for this reason that Shamir and Eilam (2005), among others, have theorized that "Authentic leaders do not fake their leadership … Nor do they work on developing an image or persona" because when they enact a leadership role "… authentic leaders are being themselves (as opposed to conforming to others' expectations)" (pp. 396–397).

3 | AN EMPIRICAL (EXPLORATORY) ILLUSTRATION

One might reasonably conclude that there is little left to debate regarding the validity of the authentic leadership construct as developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008). To do so, however, would contradict the extent to which authentic leadership is operationalized using the ALQ. Indeed, the prevalence and scope of authentic leadership research is expanding—Gardner and Karam's (non-exhaustive) review identified 128 published articles since 2010 with scholars using diverse samples (e.g., Australia, Austria, Belgium, China, Germany, Greece, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Portugal, Serbia,

Slovenia, and Taiwan) domains (e.g., business, education, medicine, military, politics, and sports) and methodologies (e.g., laboratory, field, quasi-experiments) to expand the scholarly conversation (see Gardner et al., 2021). Given this increased interest, it is surprising that few (if any) studies have empirically explored the issues identified in the section above. Ergo, in the exploratory empirical endeavor that follows, we determine whether authenticity is, in fact, infused into the authentic leadership construct (developed by Walumbwa et al., 2008). Specifically, we sought to explore a key, unresolved theoretical issue— that is, can Sartre and Heidegger's philosophical contributions inform how researchers currently study the phenomenon of authentic leadership?

Existential philosophy explicitly acknowledges the importance of authenticity's theoretical tie to a leader's action and choice. Sartre (1999) uses the example of a coward where a person is not a coward because of some physiological predisposition but becomes a coward as a result of their choices and actions. Therefore, a person is perceived as a coward because they have acted cowardly. The implication for authentic leadership is that a person simply does not come into this world as an authentic leader but rather becomes one by *acting authentically*.

When completing the ALQ the implicit assumption is that study participants are evaluating the authenticity of their own actions (leader self-report) or a leader's actions (other-report). However, it is not entirely clear that participants are actually considering perceptions of leader authenticity when completing the ALQ. In fact, the ALQ instructions do not ask participants to evaluate leader actions (i.e., authenticity), but instead ask participants to judge how frequently each supplied "statement" (i.e., 16 survey items) fits a "leadership style." When considering the existential viewpoint, the ALQ's survey instructions may in fact be misleading and certainly do raise questions as to what study participants are evaluating. Are authentic actions synonymous with a leadership style comprised of 16 behaviors? Or are authentic actions a separate conceptual domain, suggesting that the concept of authenticity has something to offer beyond the current approach to studying the authentic leadership construct? These questions bear directly on the efficacy of the authentic leadership construct and, thus, the utility of the measure designed to assess the concept. Therefore

> Research Question 1: Is the lack of existential development problematic for the authentic leadership construct's theoretical underpinnings? Do existential ideologies from key philosophical thinkers including Sartre and Heidegger add meaningful information over and above the current authentic leadership construct?

3.1 | Method: participants and procedures

Data were collected via Prolific Academic. When conducting research on authentic leadership, two perspectives are available to scholars:

(a) the self-referential approach, wherein individuals (leaders) provide self-ascriptive information and (b) the relational approach, wherein other stakeholders' (subordinates) perceptions of a target individual's behavior are considered. Following the predominant approach in existing research, we developed our study using a relational lens. Hence, participants responded to an online survey asking them to think about their recent interactions with their immediate supervisor and answer a series of questions. Of the 250 individuals who completed the survey, we received useable data from 245 participants (98%), who were paid $2.75. Three participants were removed because they incorrectly answered a quality control item, and two participants were removed because they incorrectly answered a comprehension item related to authenticity (described below). All participants lived in the United States, were 20+ years old, employed (not self-employed), and regularly interacted with their supervisor. Participants averaged 34 years of age ($SD = 9.3$) and 39 h of work per week ($SD = 9.4$), and 51% were male. A majority of participants indicated they have been reporting to their supervisor for 2 years or more (51%) and interact with their supervisor at least once a day to many times a day (53.1%).

3.2 | Survey measures

3.2.1 | Authentic leadership behavior

We used Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) ALQ.[5] Participants were told to think about their immediate supervisor at work and judge the extent to which the following behaviors fit with their leadership style (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha = .93.

3.2.2 | Authenticity of actions

Participants were told to continue to think about interactions with their immediate supervisor when answering this set of questions. They were told, however, to base their responses on their perceptions of their supervisor's authenticity. The survey design then provided participants with a brief definition and examples of (in)authenticity. Next, participants completed two comprehension questions: "Do you understand what authenticity is" (yes/no) and "An authentic behavior is genuine, meaning that it reflects your supervisor's core beliefs and nature" (true/false). Finally, participants judged the extent to which the behaviors comprising the ALQ, when enacted by their supervisor, were authentic in nature. To illustrate, "If/when my direct supervisor … [insert ALQ behavior here] this behavior (1 = is not at all consistent with his/her values and beliefs; 4 = accurately reflects his/her true nature and beliefs)." Cronbach's alpha = .94.

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[5]Considering our study's purpose, we did not alter the ALQ; for example, by removing the internalized moral perspective items. Whereas this facet is the target of debate, we included this facet's items for two reasons. First, we wished to stay consistent with the literature using the ALQ. Second, in doing so, we believe we have a more comprehensive test of our research question.

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Authentic leadership	3.69	0.79									
2. Authenticity of actions	3.11	0.62	.86								
3. Affect-based trust	3.46	1.08	.70	.66							
4. Cognitive-based trust	4.09	0.99	.79	.73	.59						
5. Liking of leader	3.86	1.18	.77	.70	.77	.72					
6. Organizational cynicism	2.77	1.19	−.48	−.52	−.34	−.46	−.46				
7. Psychological contract breach	2.36	1.07	−.58	−.56	−.48	−.60	−.58	.55			
8. Job satisfaction	3.61	1.12	.57	.51	.56	.46	.66	−.47	−.55		
9. Task performance	4.58	0.61	.33	.35	.31	.37	.42	−.23	−.30	.30	
10. Organizational citizenship behavior	4.07	.077	.34	.41	.47	.29	.34	−.20	−.20	.31	.31

Note: $n = 245$ individuals. Correlations of $|.20|$ or greater are significant at $p < .01$.

3.2.3 | Focal criteria

We included various affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes to more fully explore the role of authenticity when studying the authentic leadership construct. Unless otherwise noted, a 5-point Likert response scale was used (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). To begin, we felt that affect-based trust ($\alpha = .86$, three-items; McAllister, 1995) and cognition-based trust ($\alpha = .86$, three-items; McAllister, 1995) were theoretically appropriate criteria to investigate. We also assessed the extent to which participants liked their supervisor ($\alpha = .94$, $r = .89$, two-items; Brown & Keeping, 2005). In addition, we explored participants' organizational cynicism ($\alpha = .72$, $r = .56$, two-items; Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003) and psychological contract breach ($\alpha = .79$, three-items; Robinson & Morrison, 2000) beliefs, as well as their job satisfaction ($\alpha = .89$, $r = .80$, two-items; Brayfield & Rothe, 1951). Finally, we believed task performance ($\alpha = .87$, three-items; Williams & Anderson, 1991) and organizational citizenship behaviors ($\alpha = .79$, three-items; Williams & Anderson, 1991), two of the most focal criteria in management and applied psychology, were important to investigate. Following Schoorman and Mayer (2008), we asked participants for their supervisor's assessment of their performance and extra-role behaviors rather than their own assessment. This "common perspective" approach corresponds more closely with supervisors' appraisals of their employees than a direct perspective (i.e., the participants' own view of their behavior).

3.3 | Exploratory results

Our purpose in conducting this exploratory study was to investigate whether an existential lens—that is, authenticity of actions—is capable of providing meaningful information over and above the authentic leadership construct (i.e., ALQ; Walumbwa et al., 2008). We considered three empirical issues in examining this matter. The first issue involves the discriminant validity of the authenticity of actions construct from the authentic leadership construct. The second issue concerns the incremental importance (LeBreton et al., 2007) of the new

variable (i.e., authenticity of actions). Incremental importance is an appropriate test because it determines whether a new variable of interest is tapping unique variance in a criterion over and above that of other, existing variables. That being said, while incremental importance ensures that the authenticity of actions variable is not statistically redundant with the authentic leadership construct, this test attributes any shared criterion-related validity to the authentic leadership variable because it was entered first into a regression model. The third empirical issue involves usefulness analyses (Darlington, 1968) and a consideration of authenticity of action's relative importance, defined as "the contribution each predictor makes to the R^2, considering both its unique contribution and its contribution in the presence of the other predictors" (LeBreton et al., 2007, p. 477).

As shown in Table 2, authentic leadership and authenticity of actions are strongly correlated ($r = .86$). Although this suggests a considerable amount of overlap, it by no means implies that the two variables are indicators of the same underlying construct. More specifically, confirmatory factor analyses indicated that authentic leadership and authenticity of actions are empirically distinct.[6] A baseline two-factor measurement model allowing the factors to freely correlate was a good fit to the data, $\chi^2 = 135.1$, $df = 17$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .94, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .034, and Akaike information criterion (AIC) = 169.1. An alternative model, in which the two factors were set to correlate at 1.0, yielded a substantively worse fit to the data, $\chi^2 = 205.5$, $df = 16$, CFI = .90, SRMR = .13, and AIC = 240.5. Moreover, a chi-square difference test ($\Delta = 70.4$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < .001$) and AIC values both demonstrate that the baseline model is a superior fit to the observed data.

Table 3 illustrates our findings relating to incremental importance, usefulness, and relative importance of authenticity of actions compared to authentic leadership. Using hierarchical regression, we first

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[6]We created parcels that used each construct's subfacets as the grouping criteria (Hall et al., 1999). Individual items were averaged to form scale scores for each construct's subdimensions and, then, these subdimensions were used as manifest indicators of the latent construct. Advantages of doing so include reducing the sample size-to-parameter ratio and producing more reliable latent variables, while keeping the multidimensional nature of the constructs explicit (Hall et al., 1999; Little et al., 2002).

tested the contribution of the authenticity of actions measure (entered in Step 2) over and above the prediction of the authentic leadership measure (entered in Step 1). These results were then compared to the reverse situation (i.e., usefulness analysis)—that is, authenticity of actions was entered in the first step and authentic leadership was entered in the second step of the hierarchical regression.

TABLE 3 Incremental importance of, usefulness analyses of, and relative importance of authenticity of actions compared to authentic leadership.

Variables	Incremental importance ΔR^2	Raw importance estimates		Rescaled estimates (%)
		B	RW	RWRS
Dependent variable = affect-based trust (R^2 = .51)				
1. Authentic leadership	.50**	.70	.28	55.6
2. Authenticity of actions	.01*	.21	.23	44.4
1. Authenticity of actions	.44**	.66		
2. Authentic leadership	.07**	.52		
Dependent variable = cognitive-based trust (R^2 = .63)				
1. Authentic leadership	.62**	.79	.35	56.3
2. Authenticity of actions	.01*	.21	.27	43.7
1. Authenticity of actions	.54**	.73		
2. Authentic leadership	.09**	.60		
Dependent variable = liking of leader (R^2 = .59)				
1. Authentic leadership	.59**	.77	.35	58.8
2. Authenticity of actions	.00	.13	.25	41.2
1. Authenticity of actions	.48**	.70		
2. Authentic leadership	.11**	.66		
Dependent variable = organizational cynicism (R^2 = .27)				
1. Authentic leadership	.23**	−.48	.12	43.6
2. Authenticity of actions	.04**	−.40	.15	56.4
1. Authenticity of actions	.27**	−.52		
2. Authentic leadership	.00	−.14		
Dependent variable = psychological contract breach (R^2 = .35)				
1. Authentic leadership	.34**	−.58	.19	54.0
2. Authenticity of actions	.01*	−.22	.16	46.0
1. Authenticity of actions	.31**	−.56		
2. Authentic leadership	.04**	−.40		
Dependent variable = job satisfaction (R^2 = .33)				
1. Authentic leadership	.33**	.57	.20	60.8
2. Authenticity of actions	.00	.05	.13	39.2
1. Authenticity of actions	.26**	.51		
2. Authentic leadership	.07**	.53		
Dependent variable = task performance (R^2 = .12)				
1. Authentic leadership	.10**	.33	.06	45.1
2. Authenticity of actions	.02*	.25	.07	54.9
1. Authenticity of actions	.12**	.35		
2. Authentic leadership	.00	.12		
Dependent variable = organizational citizenship behavior (R^2 = .17)				
1. Authentic leadership	.12**	.34	.06	34.4
2. Authenticity of actions	.05**	.46	.11	65.6
1. Authenticity of actions	.17**	.41		
2. Authentic leadership	.00	−.06		

Abbreviations: B, standardized regression coefficient; RW, raw weight; RWRS, relative weight re-scaled.
*p < .05, and **p < .01.

As shown in Table 3, our results indicated that with two exceptions (i.e., liking of leader and job satisfaction), authenticity of actions explained a significant amount of unique variance in the other six criteria beyond the contribution of authentic leadership. We also find that authenticity of actions contributes significantly to organizational cynicism beliefs, task performance, and organizational citizenship behavior (above and beyond authentic leadership), whereas authentic leadership does not account for unique variance in these three criteria (i.e., when authenticity of actions is entered in step 1). Restated, for organizational cynicism, task performance, and organizational citizenship behavior, *it is not the frequency of the leaders' behavior that matters most but rather the extent to which followers found those acts to be authentically genuine*. This reflects, in our minds, a significantly noteworthy finding and provides novel insight into the authenticity of actions construct and its value for understanding leadership-focused outcomes.

In the hierarchical regression analyses just described, recall that any criterion variance that is predicted by both authentic leadership and authenticity of actions is automatically "credited" to the variable entered into step 1 of the analyses. Consequently, the relatively small increments in unique variance made by authenticity of actions (when entered in step 2) may lead one to make "flawed" decisions about the variable's efficacy—it is still possible that the overall contribution that the authenticity of actions variable makes to the multiple correlation is as high as (or higher than) the authentic leadership variable already entered into the regression model (see, e.g., LeBreton et al., 2007). To explore this further, relative importance analysis (LeBreton et al., 2007) is a useful method to ascertain a predictor variable's contribution to the overall model R^2, especially when there are existing correlated predictors (as is the case in the present study). Once more, these findings are provided in Table 3. An inspection of the rescaled relative importance weights (take the raw weight and divide by model R^2) reveals that authenticity of actions accounted for, on average, 48.9% of the total predicted criterion variance across the eight focal outcomes. Moreover, authenticity of actions emerged as the more important predictor of followers' organizational cynicism, task performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors. Just as interesting, followers liked their leader more and felt more satisfied in their jobs when their leaders exhibited the various behaviors comprising the ALQ, regardless of whether such acts were genuine or not.

3.4 | Does leadership need authenticity?

In short, yes! The incremental importance analyses indicated that authenticity of actions accounted for unique criterion variance in six of the eight focal outcomes, although the increases in model R^2 were relatively small in magnitude.[7] Nonetheless, not only did authenticity

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[7]Whereas common method variance is often described as a study limitation, in the present instance, it is not because we were interested in accounting for unique variance. In this instance, the presence of common-method variance makes it *more difficult* to find support for the unique value of the authenticity of actions variable.

of actions add increments in explained variance, it was *the more important predictor* as compared to authentic leadership for organizational cynicism as well as two critically important outcomes in applied psychology— task performance and organizational citizenship behavior. All in all, our exploratory illustration demonstrates how incorporating survey questions that ask followers to evaluate the "authentic intent" of their immediate supervisors' behavior is valuable for authentic leadership scholars insofar as it transforms the followers' agency in the meaning-making process. Our exploratory findings are an important first step and further illustrate the need to bring authenticity and actions back into leadership.

4 | DISCUSSION

The authentic leadership construct has become a dominant focus within leadership research, in part, because of its morally grounded perspective, which positive psychology touted as a remedy to society's need for rebuilt optimism and confidence in "big business." To be sure, we agree that ethics and morality play a critical role in the leadership influence process, and we see value in the findings generated from existing authentic leadership research. Nevertheless, our review of the literature sought to clarify and reemphasize important conceptual and measurement issues associated with the authentic leadership construct developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008). With our exploratory results, we contribute to an ongoing debate that has questioned whether the authentic leadership construct holds theoretical and practical value (see, e.g., Alvesson & Einola, 2022; Gardner & McCauley, 2022; Iszatt-White et al., 2021). Thus, the authentic leadership field stands at a crossroad facing an existential choice about its future.

4.1 | Taking stock of the authentic leadership construct: Where do we go from here?

Pragmatically speaking, there are two paths available, and they offer different outcomes for those interested in investigating authentic leadership. The first path encourages researchers to keep the authentic leadership construct "as is" but clarify what construct Walumbwa et al. (2008)'s four-part framework is tapping into and relabel it accordingly. Our study's exploratory results support prior critiques that counter Walumbwa et al. (2008)'s claim that their survey measure and conceptualization captures authentic leadership per se, as a style or form of leading. In this connection, Alvesson and Einola (2019) conclude that for authenticity to be studied successfully, researchers must stop treating it as "things [that] are lumped together into an authentic leadership score" (p. 7). At the same time, extant authentic leadership research is, however, informing practice insofar as the ALQ has been linked to an array of beneficial outcomes (Banks et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018). Indeed, our exploratory results support the ALQ's value. When leaders enact the behaviors comprising the ALQ (Walumbwa et al., 2008), followers respond with liking their leader

more as well as higher levels of job satisfaction, affect- and cognitive-trust with supervisors, and a more positive psychological contract with the organization. The ALQ's link to positive organizational outcomes underscores the motivation behind keeping the construct rather than abandoning it. Yet, our empirical findings illustrate that the ALQ does not appear to be capturing *authentic intent* as implied in the survey measure's name but rather some other phenomenon, raising questions as to what the survey measure is actually evaluating. Hence, identifying what phenomenon the ALQ is *actually* tapping into, and relabeling it accordingly, becomes a foundational task for future research to undertake.

The second path consists of developing a new authentic leadership construct. Path two proposes a complete rebuild because authentic leadership's theoretical, conceptual, and measurement deficiencies are so extensive that refining Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) conceptualization cannot satisfactorily address them. In retracing the development of the authentic leadership construct, our work echoes prior concerns regarding whether authentic leadership studies are actually measuring what they assume to be measuring (see Alvesson & Einola, 2019). Our review also illuminated a second development of equal concern—that is, Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) conceptualization is so embedded in the literature that quantitative investigations using the ALQ have largely stopped questioning its theoretical origins.

As such, rather than starting anew, prior attempts to resolve authentic leadership's purported issues have only resulted in incremental change where alternative survey instruments are proposed (Levesque-Côté et al., 2018) or existing instruments are revisited (Avolio et al., 2018), but no radical change actually occurs to its underlying theoretical structure. For example, Neider and Schriesheim (2011) discussed potential empirical issues with the ALQ developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008) and introduced an alternative survey instrument called the Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI). In doing so, however, Neider and Schriesheim (2011) did not question Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) reason for employing theory from social psychology instead of existential philosophy nor acknowledge that Kernis' (2003) action component was replaced with internalized moral perspective. Rather, Neider and Schriesheim (2011) developed their survey instrument by paralleling the ALQ's theoretical base, stating that a "major contribution" from Walumbwa et al. (2008) was that their operationalization and measure of authentic leadership was built on a "thorough review" of multiple theoretical contributions and disciplines (p. 1147). Neider and Schriesheim's (2011) decision to leverage the ALQ's conceptual base further legitimized Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) framework, leading proponents of authentic leadership to revisit the ALQ's construct validity (Avolio et al., 2018) and further justify the inclusion of internalized moral perspective (Gardner et al., 2021, Letters 1 and 3). Despite efforts to bolster the ALQ's psychometric properties, until leadership scholars bring authentic actions back into the construct's conceptualization, and devise novel research designs from which to measure it, the authentic leadership construct (as it is currently constituted) is not likely to advance our understanding of authenticity's role in a leadership context.

We recognize that Path 2 is more drastic as it includes completely tearing-down authentic leadership's existing theoretical structure and rebuilding it using an inductive, theory-driven process. Such an undertaking for the authentic leadership construct will involve many decisions needing strong theoretical justification that are well beyond the scope of this paper. That being said, we provide a couple of considerations that we hope researchers will heed. The first, and most obvious, is that researchers explicitly follow best practices for construct development (i.e., Carpenter et al., 2016; Haynes et al., 1995; Hinkin, 1998). This includes developing a clear and theoretically sound definition and establishing its nomological network by articulating the antecedents, correlates, and outcomes of the newly developed authentic leadership construct. The notion of distinguishing the construct from its consequences is particularly critical (Alvesson, 2020; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), as the conflation of leader behaviors and their effects "does not allow for deciphering the distinct causal role" of the leader behaviors and thus "conflation impedes both theoretical and empirical advancements" (Banks et al., 2021, p. 3).

Our second consideration focuses on the dimensionality of the newly constructed authentic leadership construct. In order to avoid future criticism, the conceptualization of the construct (and its dimensions) must clearly align with theory and explicitly explain how the different dimensions combine to form the authentic leadership construct (see, e.g., Law et al., 1998; Wong et al., 2008). For example, while most would agree that morals and ethics are important and worthy of research in a leadership context, the existentialists that are routinely cited in authentic leadership studies consider authentic behavior as being morally neutral. This neutrality indicates that a moral emphasis should not be included in authentic leadership's measurement and conceptualization. Moreover, when Walumbwa et al. (2008) exchanged Kernis' (2003) action component for internalized moral perspective, they created conceptual ambiguity regarding how the ALQ accounts for authenticity's key assumption—that is, whether a leader's actions align with their true Self as opposed to them acting merely to please others, attain rewards, or avoid punishments (Kernis, 2003). As such, internalized moral perspective honors a leader's morality and ethics, but not the authenticity of a leader's discrete actions, specifically. And, as we have empirically demonstrated, the extent to which a leader's actions (based on the ALQ) are interpreted as authentically genuine by followers provides meaningful information. Indeed, the authenticity of the act (vs. the person exhibiting it) as being theoretically relevant is consistent with the basic logic of living an authentic life (Heidegger, 1962; Kernis, 2003; Sartre, 1999) and should be a central point of the rebuilt construct.

4.2 | Untangling authentic actions from authentic leaders: Why authentic actions are powerful

As the authentic leadership scholarship moves forward, it becomes paramount to understand the difference between authentic actions and authentic leaders. To date, published studies on authentic leadership largely frame their theoretical questions and hypotheses

by exploring the relationship between authentic leadership and various organizational outcomes. In so doing, the de facto unit of analysis is the leader—thus, this type of inquiry attributes authenticity to the leader's Being, not the leader's actions specifically. We contend that this is because the current approach of studying authentic leadership has confounded (a) the authenticity of the action with (b) the authenticity of the leader. On one hand, we suspect that this tendency is due, in part, to the survey instruments developed to tap the authentic leadership construct. Specifically, the ALQ and ALI were similarly designed to ask leaders and followers to judge how frequently a set of statements fit the leadership style of a target individual. On the other hand, the tendency of attributing authenticity to the leaders themselves may also stem from a study's use of a surface-level "sound bite" citation strategy (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, p. 387) that may reference key existentialist scholars, yet the study's authors do not fully appreciate authenticity's philosophical roots (Gardiner, 2011).

Further muddying the waters, a quick inspection of the literature suggests that "authentic leadership" has become a blanket term used interchangeably when discussing both authentic leaders and their actions. Using the terms interchangeably (i.e., conceptual equivalents) is problematic because while the leader's actions are finite, the leader's Being is not. This issue was recently re-emphasized by Gardner et al. (2021, Letters 1 and 3, pp. 13–14), wherein the authors state that "authenticity is not an either/or condition," but rather, it is aspirational in the sense that leaders "can be more or less authentic at any point in time and across situations." Existentialism acknowledges this reality by proposing that individuals can never achieve complete authenticity insofar as they are more likely to have moments of both authenticity and inauthenticity (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012). In this connection, by differentiating between the domains of authentic actions from authentic leaders, we facilitate a better understanding of the authentic leadership construct and its temporal dynamics (a point we return to shortly).

4.3 | Authenticity and its implications for future leadership research

Our conclusion—actions are authentic, not leaders—raises key questions about the study of authenticity in a leadership context, which holds implications for future research. We created Figure 1 to provide future researchers with conceptual and theoretical guidance. Within Figure 1, we use the elongated arrow associated with Part A, to help illustrate the existential concept of the leader's Being, and the role actions play in its creation and development. The elongated arrow shows the leader's Being includes the (authentic) Self in relation with the (inauthentic) Other where the leader's choices, and resultant actions, moves their Being along the authenticity–inauthenticity continuum. As also displayed in Part A, leadership is a dynamic and episodic process, wherein an act of genuine authenticity represents only one of many actions a leader will make with the passage of time. Consequently, one episode of (in)authentic action does not make leaders wholly (in)authentic, but rather moves their Being towards becoming more (or less) authentic. Put another way, it is the pattern or collection of a leader's actions over a given window of time that moves their Being towards or away from authenticity. It follows then, that future researchers have an opportunity to better understand the trajectories and patterns of (in)authentic actions by more fully considering the temporal context in which leadership resides (see, e.g., Shipp & Cole, 2015).

Next, we created Part B in Figure 1 to help future researchers successfully apply the binary authentic–inauthentic characterization to a leader's *actions* (instead of the leader's Being). Existentialism allows for this binary characterization because the leader's actions are bound by the forces of the Self versus the Other where leaders either choose to act authentically following the Self or inauthentically following the Other. Whereas Figure 1 Part A focuses on the leader's Being and its fluctuation between the Self and the Other, Part B highlights the leader's choice points, which we illustrate through
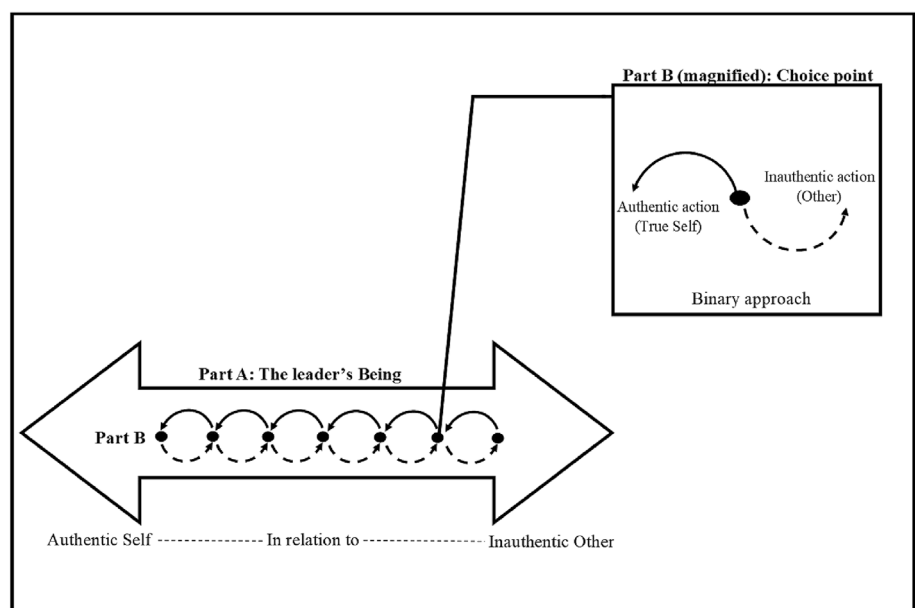

FIGURE 1 Authentic leadership: the relationships among Actions, the Self, and the Other.

seven opaque dots in the elongated arrow. To show how the binary authentic–inauthentic characterization can describe the leader's action, we magnify Part B in the upper right-hand box of Figure 1 titled, *choice point*. Part B illustrates that actions are authentic when leaders follow their own volition and act according to their inner convictions (true Self). In contrast, actions are inauthentic when leaders concede to forces from the Other and act against their inner convictions. Understanding the authentic–inauthentic characterization will assist future theory development efforts because actions are the mechanism through which leaders become more or less authentic.[8] This way of thinking about authenticity and its application to leaders' behaviors or actions (beyond just studying the authentic leadership construct) offers researchers new avenues for studying leadership phenomena.

4.4 | Future authenticity research: The self-referential and relational perspectives

We encourage future researchers to consider two perspectives— (a) self-referential and (b) relational—when developing their forthcoming studies on authenticity. The self-referential perspective views authenticity as occurring through an internal process that happens exclusively inside the leader's Being. This internal process embraces the intra-individual nature of authenticity and, therefore assumes that authenticity does not include any overt consideration of other actors (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). As a result, authenticity reflects the leaders' *own* interpretations of whether their actions are aligned with who they truly are. That is, the leader derives any legitimization for their choices and behaviors from within themselves (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012). The underlying premise being only the focal leader knows if they acted in an (in)authentic fashion—implying that (in) authenticity is not observable by others and thus cannot be assessed by others (see Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 1, pp. 4–5).

Such a perspective has important implications for researchers' theoretical questions and study design. To begin, a self-referential perspective requires a leader-centric lens, further implying that this perspective is geared towards understanding the leaders' perceptions of their own actions. Said differently, a self-referential study of authentic behavior is interested in understanding the consistency between how leaders view themselves and how they subsequently choose to behave in their environments across different situations (Spitzmuller & Ilies, 2010). In terms of design, the intra-individual nature of research questions involving a self-referential perspective

will require introspective methods where researchers employ survey instruments, qualitative methods, or both to gain insight into the focal leader's reflexive thoughts behind their specific actions/choices (e.g., Ilies et al., 2005). And, in doing so, a study could explore theoretically relevant outcomes of when the leader's actions followed their true Self (authentic act) or succumbed to the forces of the Other (inauthentic act). For example, having "fallen" (i.e., yielded to existing social pressures) and in turn acted inauthentically, does a leader experience psychosocial resource loss as a result of the need to act superficially? Or, with the passage of time, do they begin to withdraw from their organization because of the perceived need to portray someone they are not?

Alternatively, as exemplified by our empirical illustration, a second perspective to studying authenticity in a leadership context uses a relational lens. A relational lens considers the other side of the coin by acknowledging followers' role in the creation of authenticity (e.g., Leroy et al., 2015; Peterson, 2005). Relational theory views authentic leadership as a co-constructed process where authenticity emerges from contextually dependent interactions between leaders and others as opposed to the autonomous perception of the leader (Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Therefore, relational theory shifts the study of authentic leadership away from leader-centric ideologies and towards a process of organizing, wherein a leader's perception of their own authenticity does not constitute reality because their followers' perceptions hold equivalent influence (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Eagly, 2005; Guthey & Jackson, 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006, 2011). Important, then, is the realization, following Thomas's theorem (Merton, 1995), that it matters little whether a follower's perception of their leader's authentic behavior is grounded in objectivity for it to be real in its consequences. Indeed, the social psychology literature has long acknowledged that if individuals define things as real (whether their perceptions are accurate or inaccurate), they are real in their consequences (Merton, 1995).

The adoption of a relational perspective by future researchers likewise holds important implications for theory and study design. Perhaps most importantly, this line of inquiry provides conceptual grounding for studying authentic leadership behavior as a subjectively based construct. As such, it is the Others' view of the situation that is the most important element for interpretation insofar as their "immediate behavior is closely related to [their] *definition of the situation*, which may be in terms of objective reality or in terms of a subjective appreciation—'as if' it were so" (Merton, 1995, p. 384, emphasis in original). Theoretical questions looking to study authentic leadership from a relational approach will, for example, seek to understand how other organizational actors (e.g., followers and other leaders) perceive, and respond to, their leaders' actions. Such studies will look at all participants within the system of production, representation, and distribution that together shape authenticity (Moeran, 2005). Regarding study design, we again suspect that survey instruments and qualitative methods will prove useful to researchers wishing to study authentic leadership from a relational lens. For instance, researchers might employ survey methodologies that allow them to capture authentic leadership perceptions

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[8]Existential philosophy suggests that (a) the authenticity of the action and (b) the authenticity of the leader do not have equivalent meanings because actions are binary (actions are either authentic or inauthentic) whereas leaders are dynamic and consistently redefining themselves through actions. This view does not say anything about a preferred leadership style or typology. For example, transformational leadership, empowering leadership, shared leadership, and even ethical leadership all emphasize certain sets of leader behaviors, any of which may or may not be aligned with a leader's self-concept. Hence, a transformational leader can be authentic or inauthentic. Similarly, a leader may routinely use empowering behaviors to influence followers, not because they enjoy relinquishing control but, rather, because they have been trained to do so and performance evaluations (and merit raises) are based on the extent to which they do so.

(of a focal target leader) from multiple organizational actors, including different stakeholder groups (e.g., peers and subordinates) and examine how stakeholders' perceptual similarities or differences influence relevant organizational outcomes.

We anticipate that the above discussion will assist interested researchers in thinking about as well as answering broad-stroked questions such as "how do leaders become more (less) authentic." To be sure, however, there exists a myriad of more specific questions

TABLE 4 Directions for future research.

Topics	Possible research questions	Exemplary cites
(1) Does authentic leadership matter? There is an ongoing debate in the literature regarding whether authentic leadership holds practical and theoretical value. This debate has led researchers to ask, is authenticity merely a romanticized view of leadership, stemming from an emphasis on values-based models and excessive positivity?	• Is it possible, or even desirable, to build a consensus around authentic leadership theory? • What does it mean to lead with authenticity? Why does leading authentically matter for leaders and organizations? • Where does authenticity fit within the nomological network of existing state, traits, and behavioral research in leadership? What is the potential connection, or lack thereof, between values-based leadership and authentic leader actions?	Alvesson and Einola (2019, 2022) Crawford et al. (2020) Gardner et al. (2021) Gardner and McCauley (2022) Iszatt-White et al. (2021) Ladkin and Spiller (2013) Novicevic et al. (2006)
(2) Situational awareness. Leaders enact different versions of themselves across various events, circumstances, time points, and interactions. Future researchers should more fully consider how these contextual and relational factors affect authenticity.	• Are there situations when genuine authenticity is more (less) important for leaders? For example, is authenticity more (less) important during times of crisis, uncertainty, change, expansion, or consolidation? • Is it beneficial to inauthentically engage in positive leadership styles?	Gardiner (2015) Ladkin and Taylor (2010) Liu et al. (2017) O'Brien and Linehan (2019)
(3) Privilege. Privilege and power are inherent parts of authentic leadership research, giving scholars an opportunity to better account for them in their future investigations. We encourage additional research on how gender, race, class, disability, age, religion, and sexual orientation as well as cultural systems, normative influences, power dynamics, and structural barriers affect leader authenticity.	• Does the study of authenticity legitimize leader privilege and power? • Can leaders who do not fit conventional prototypes act authentically and not be penalized? • Is authenticity a type of earned privilege? How does the study of authenticity propagate implicit bias and long-held prejudices?	Eagly (2005) Faircloth (2017) Fox-Kirk (2017) Ladkin (2021) Liu et al. (2015) Procknow and Rocco (2021) Sinclair (2013)
(4) Non-binary nature of authenticity. Authenticity is naturally a non-binary concept as leaders display acts of both authenticity and inauthenticity. Future researchers have an opportunity to further examine co-existing opposites where leaders display acts of authenticity and inauthenticity. This stream contributes to the critique around how authentic leaders enact a true self or what selves authentic leaders are true to?	• What are the implications of studying authenticity's non-binary nature? • How do the paradoxical tensions of authenticity vs. inauthenticity inform the study of authenticity? Is there an authenticity paradox? • Could a "paradox mindset" (where leaders learn to accept conflicting authentic vs. inauthentic tensions) help leaders live more authentically?	Boje et al. (2013) Heil (2013) Nyberg and Sveningsson (2014) Shamir and Eilam (2005) Shaw (2010) Tomkins and Simpson (2015) Vendette et al. (2022)
(5) Self-perceptions, compromise (social conformity), and decision-making. Authenticity research would benefit from scholars further considering the implications of self-perceptions, compromise, decision-making bias, and discursive practice. While Heidegger and Sartre's work views compromise as inauthentic by definition, future work has an opportunity to explore authenticity's relevance to process research, practice approaches, and social influence scholarship.	• What is the role of accuracy in self-perceptions of authenticity? Is it possible for leaders to be truly authentic in evaluating their authenticity, and for whom does this matter? • How does comprise relate to situations where leaders or followers have taken on the organization's values as their own? How does the internalization of core organizational values affect leaders and followers? Is compromise a form of subtle control?	Cloutier and Langley (2020) Costas & Fleming, 2009 Ford and Harding (2011) Gardiner (2017) Lehman et al. (2019)
(6) Temporality. Future works should more fully consider the temporal context in which authenticity resides. This allows researchers to answer questions about *how* authenticity is enacted by leaders and experienced by followers over time. For some leaders, behaving authentically when influencing others may remain consistent over time, yet others may experience fluctuations where the authenticity of their acts may be escalating or deescalating.	• Does the authenticity of a leader's preferred style of leading change over time? • Are there trajectories or patterns of (in)authentic leadership behavior, and how do they affect leader and/or follower outcomes over time? • How does objective (clock) time influence followers' perceptions of whether their leader has acted authentically? Does stability of authentic acts lead to more positive outcomes, or is the sole genuine act sufficient to affect outcomes in the moment?	Gardiner (2015) Gardner et al. (2021, p. 6) Langley (1999) Tourish (2019)

involving when, where, and for whom does authenticity matter in leadership. We organized these unanswered research questions in Table 4, providing scholars with key topics regarding authenticity's role in the practice of leadership. Even though the topics identified and research questions posed in Table 4 are not exhaustive, we hope that they will serve as a launching pad for future research on the authenticity of actions construct.

In sum, as evidenced herein, current scholarship continues to confound leader actions and leader authenticity and treats their conceptual differences as if they are unproblematic. Actions are (in)authentic, not people—thus, we hope that our work sparks interest in authentic behaviors within a leadership context as it is meaningful enough to deserve more focused research attention.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors do not have a conflict of interest with the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, their representatives, or any organizations that may be interested in this research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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